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By-Rutledge, Donald G.

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The possibility that many English teachers take their subject too seriously should be considered. The assumption that literature can to any degree either improve or adversely affect students is doubtful, but the exclusive study of "great literature" in our secondary schools may invite basic reflections too early: a year's steady diet of "King Lear," "Heart of Darkness," and "Lord of the Flies" may turn a student away from literature toward more optimistic pursuits. The stressing of form, techniques, and literary merit before such considerations matter to the student may also remove his delight in literature. To counteract these tendencies, study should not be restricted to great literature; instead, it should include books which speak to the child and, while offering him stimulation, do not force him beyond his present capabilities: most children, like adults, read to satisfy fantasy needs. Because the arts seem one of the chances for overcoming the universal boredom and violence which menace Western society, literature must be made a more natural part of more people's lives, and any distortion of the natural growth of artistic perception through misguided literature teaching should be avoided. (LH)

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Literary experience of the most memorable kind involves discovery which, whether or not it can be defined and assessed, remains profound and permanent. I suspect it is this kind of discovery which lies at the heart of . . . "growing up".
(Edward Rosenheim, Jr., "A Defence of Poesy: 1967," *NCTE 1967 Distinguished Lectures)*

Teaching Literature:

*Some Honest Doubts**

Donald G. Rutledge

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If you are, like me, an English teacher, you probably find it hard to believe that you may take your subject too seriously. But both of us should consider the possibility. With everyone telling us how much language has to do with emotional and intellectual development in children, and everyone else announcing that literature is a prime cause of better human beings, the temptation to assume an evangelical stance is great. Yet what Auden said about writers is even more true for English teachers: *'Writers can be guilty of every kind of human conceit except that of the social worker: We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for, I don't know.'*

Since we English teachers do a kind of social work with writers' products, our temptation to spiritual pride is twofold. That we have not entirely resisted the temptation in the past is obvious by the uneasiness we produce in many adults. We shall soon have to work, as the clergy is working, to prove we are regular chaps. English is the school subject, above all others, which gets mixed up with morality and improving people.

To some extent this can't be avoided. Literature is about life and life forces all of us to make moral decisions. But many of us add to our own problems by being unconsciously snobbish about literature, and by making excessive claims for it.

As an example of what I mean, here is a statement from a recent publication of The Schools Council of Great Britain:

English provides us with opportunities of finding or creating the

* This article is reprinted from the *Toronto Education Quarterly*, April, 1968, with the permission of the editor.

most alive, poignant and energetic expression we can of any part of our experience, and in so doing forms an essential part of the experience itself. It is not just an instrument. Literature, too, is an essential part of the process from the beginning. The literature of both past and present can illuminate the underlying pattern of human problems today. From literature the attraction of man's good qualities can be felt at its strongest: the generosity of Cordelia's 'No cause, no cause', the compassion of Wilfred Owen for his dead enemy. The impact made on our feelings by such behaviour is a lasting one: it helps to mould our own reactions to life, and we become in the best sense more human.

I am sure that for some of our students this statement holds. But are we justified in our assumption that the teaching of literature can really affect the sensibilities of *most* students in our schools? Our experiment in mass literacy, less than a century old, has not yet produced a great many people interested in 'high art'. Is this because literature has not been properly presented, or because most people never will be interested in 'high art'? Are we making the fundamental mistake of trying to graft an elitist culture onto a group of people who are not temperamentally suited to it?

Many senior teachers of English in Ontario are experimenting this year with a free choice period, when students bring their own favourite poems to school and read them to the class. Few of these poems turn out to be by major, or even recognized poets. Yet the students honestly *like* these poems—some merely trivial, some unashamedly sentimental or didactic. And remember that these are the Grade 12 and 13 students. If, as has been said and as I believe, culture must grow in the soil from which it springs, there is surely something here to make us pause. Are we giving students enough good poetry early enough to hope for a genuine development of taste? Or would it matter? I hope so. I think I believe so. But I wish we would consider our assumption a little more humbly.

Even more doubtful is the assumption that literature can improve human beings. This notion, which has been around in crystallized form since Matthew Arnold's time, needs to be questioned. In fact we know very little about the relationship of art to life. We do know that more people are influenced by movies, television and pop music than by *King Lear*. We do know that life imitates art very often, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. A girl may be led, through seeing *The Miracle Worker*, to dedicate her life to working with handicapped children. A man may be led, by reading *Justine*, as Ian Brady was led, to commit murder. In neither case is literature the *only* contributing factor, but it is a factor.

In other words, we can't have it only one way. If literature really does change people, we had better not assume that it can only improve them. And we had better be very careful about the kind of literature we present in schools, since the mass media are not under our control and not always on our side.

It could even be argued that the literature we present in secondary schools has its own special dangers, that it invites basic reflections too often, leading our most intelligent young people to self-conscious passivity or anguished questioning too soon. A typical senior course in Ontario could well include *King Lear, Death of a Salesman, Heart*

of Darkness, Lord of the Flies, and *1984*. What teacher of senior grades has not heard the complaint, from good students, that the literature presented is morbid? The world of *King Lear* is a terrible one, and once visited, never leaves the consciousness.

I know that it will be said that such vicarious experience of suffering as literature offers prepares a person for real suffering, making him less vulnerable. But I wonder. There is no denying that some of the best literature is harrowing, and a steady diet of it may darken a student's outlook.

Obviously my doubts about literature apply only to Literature with a capital L, the staples of drama, poetry and fiction which we rigidify into courses in secondary school and beyond. We have never been as grandiose in our claim for young children's stories, fairy tales and rhyme, although in fact their value to young children is more easily demonstrable than in the value of *King Lear* to adolescents.

What then, am I arguing for? Do I want an end to the teaching of literature? Not at all. But we do not need to make doubtful claims for it. The reading or writing of literature should be seen as an endemic and enjoyable human activity, worthwhile for its own sake. The mystique, the abracadabra of literary hero-worship should be replaced by a pleased and genuine relish of authentic literature. And by authentic literature I do not mean, necessarily, great literature. I mean literature which speaks to the child where he is, and moves him only as far as he can be moved at the particular moment. This will include much great literature, but it should also include the literature children create themselves—one of the best ways of making literature second nature to children. Surely the heavy emphasis on solemnity needs to be modified. And surely we should be presenting books which do more than present man's tragic plight: books leading with modern insights into psychology, language, sociology, and anthropology; books which suggest how collective action can help man in his plight, if plight it is.

In raising these fundamental doubts I have perhaps over-generalized. Obviously literature can make life more interesting, and it does affect our feelings and our attitude towards other people. I am only suggesting that if we were a little more humble about its role and our role, we would be more effective. I think some of us have suffered from a heresy that T. S. Eliot describes in *The Sacred Word:* 'It is a perpetual heresy of English culture to believe that only the first-order mind, the Genius, the Great Man, matters; that he is solitary, and produced best in the least favourable environment, perhaps the Public School.'

This snobbery syndrome also helps account for the fact that students, delighted by stories and poems in their early schooling years, often become less and less interested, and eventually even hostile to literature. There is a natural human reaction against everything which is made out, even implicitly, as good for you, or refining.

Of course there are alternatives to the heavy literary approach. We could try to learn, for example, which books really speak to children at various stages in their development. Kate Friedlander's brief start in this direction, *Children's Books and Their Function In Latency*, needs to be followed up by much more extensive research. For

another emphasis which works against an honest native culture in Canada is our pre-occupation with the conscious and cerebral in literature. Most people read for the same reason that they attend movies: to satisfy fantasy needs. We are quite willing to accept this in very young children, but we make little allowance for it as children get older, and so we often lose them as readers. We stress form, technique and literary merit long before such considerations matter to the student. And we fail to recognize what seems very obvious—that only some of our students will ever benefit from formal literary criticism. For the gifted minority technical analysis is invaluable; for the rest it is frustrating and eventually boring.

This paper is not against literature, or even against interpretation. It is a plea to have literature made a more natural part of more people's lives. In a time when it has become boring even to mention the universal boredom which menaces Western society, the arts seem one of our chances for health. The cultivation of the sensibilities can help combat the present cycle of boredom and violence. It is precisely for this reason that we must get more clever at our jobs. We know now that the same processes of discrimination which constitute the beginning of intelligence in infants are operating in the creation of our finest works of art. Anything we do in schools to distort the natural growth of artistic perception is harmful. Any mystique, any grandiose claim, anything which separates literature from the life of many people, is pernicious.